

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 279 177

FL 016 485

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TITLE The Preterite and the Perfect in BBC News Bulletins:
The Case for a Text Linguistic Approach.
PUB DATE 84
NOTE 14p.; In: Ringbom, Hakan, Ed.; Rissanen, Matti, Ed.
Proceedings from the Nordic Conference for English
Studies (2nd, Hanasaari/Hanaholmen, Finland, May
19-21, 1983); see FL 016 498.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) --
Speeches/Conference Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adverbs; *Discourse Analysis; *English; Foreign
Countries; Language Research; *Language Usage;
Linguistic Theory; *News Reporting; Oral English;
Persuasive Discourse; Radio; Speech Communication;
Standard Spoken Usage; *Tenses (Grammar); *Verbs
IDENTIFIERS *British Broadcasting Corporation; Broadcast
Journalism; Referents (Linguistics)

ABSTRACT

A study of the preterite and the perfect in English examined their use in 12 radio news bulletins of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). The study analyzed the distribution of all of the broadcasts' verb phrases over verb forms and clause types, time references (previously given and new-time), the presence or absence of adverbials or other specifiers, and whether the time reference extends to the time of usage or is wholly located in the past. The results of the analysis are discussed and the differences in verb form usage in spoken and written news bulletins are briefly examined. (MSE)

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THE PRETERITE AND THE PERFECT IN BBC NEWS BULLETINS:

THE CASE FOR A TEXT LINGUISTIC APPROACH

In this paper I shall report and comment on some results from a more extensive study of the preterite and the perfect in English. I shall take as my starting point the view that the essential meanings of the (simple) preterite (henceforth referred to as 'PRET') and the (simple) present perfect (henceforth 'PERF') are definable in terms of temporal reference.¹ PRET is used to refer to a verbal situation which is located relative to a past reference point, or 'anchor', as I prefer to call it. In the most straightforward cases such anchors are established by temporal adverbials, but there are many other, direct and indirect, ways in which anchors can be established. For a PRET verb form to be acceptable, an anchor of one kind or another is required. A sentence like

(1) John was drunk.

must be classified as unacceptable unless the linguistic or non-linguistic context offers some clue as to when it was that John is claimed to have been drunk. The sentence

(2) John was drunk last night.

contains such an anchor and is therefore fully acceptable by itself.

By contrast, PERF verb forms, far from requiring past-time anchors, are incompatible with such anchors, because what a PERF verb form does is to refer to a verbal situation which can be located anywhere within a period extending all the way up to the moment of utterance. Hence the sentence

(3) John has been drunk.

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without any temporal specification, is fully acceptable by itself. However, in cases where the verbal situation is not only located within a period which extends up to the moment of utterance but itself extends up to this moment, PERF normally does require specification: the most likely meaning of

(4) John has been drunk since early this afternoon.

cannot usually be expressed by an unspecified PERF form.

On the view I have just outlined the difference in the way the temporal reference is expressed is the only essential difference between PRET and PERF. All other meanings which have been claimed to distinguish PERF from PRET - such as current relevance, resultativeness, what have you? - are secondary and non-essential.

Of course, this does not tell the whole truth about PRET and PERF, because the obvious next question is 'What conditions the choice of specifier?'. I think the best starting point is to view verb form and specifier as expressing time together, without assuming a priori that either is primary relative to the other. In many cases a past-time anchor can be regarded as given, for instance because it has been referred to in the preceding context. PRET will then be the expected verb form. In cases where no anchor is previously given, there are in principle two possibilities, provided the reference is to time located wholly in the past: a PRET verb form may be used, accompanied by appropriate specification, or PERF may be used.

In this paper we shall look at the use of PRET and PERF from this point of view in a corpus made up of BBC news bulletins. This type of language is interesting not least because in several respects it is on the borderline between speech and writing.

One feature which the language of radio news bulletins shares with ordinary spoken language is that the moment of utterance, the deictic zero-point (henceforth referred to as 'ZERO'), is easily identifiable. This can be expected to have consequences for the choice of verb forms and other temporal deictics. Another feature typical of spoken language is a high degree of structural simplicity, conditioned by the intended oral delivery, because structural simplicity evidently facilitates comprehension. It makes the linguist's job easier too, although he needs to be aware that many other language varieties may have a more complex structure.

A feature which the language of radio news bulletins can be expected to share with written language is a close correspondence between what in Chomskyan terms would be called competence and performance: anacolutha and slips of various other kinds do not normally occur, since the announcer is reading from a script. On the assumption that it is competence we really want to investigate, this gives a special interest to the corpus compared with most kinds of ordinary spoken language. Furthermore, as in the case of written language, there will not be any interference from non-linguistic factors such as facial expression, gestures, etc., which are difficult to integrate into a linguistic analysis.

The language of radio news bulletins thus exhibits a rare combination of characteristically spoken and characteristically written features. In addition, the use of such a corpus could be expected to be rewarding in a study of the PERF/PRET opposition, because, as in the case of news reports printed in newspapers, for example, a large proportion of the verb forms will normally refer to past time, and, especially with radio news, often to the immediate past, where PERF and PRET can be assumed frequently to be in competition. A final point is that the news bulletins I examined consist of small, self-contained passages, each devoted to one major item of news. Cross-references between such passages do not occur. Of course, this again facilitates the linguistic analysis at levels above the sentence.

My corpus comprises a total of twelve news bulletins, each lasting five minutes and consisting of about 800 words, so that the size of the whole corpus is approximately 10,000 words. The bulletins were broadcast at 9 a.m., one in the summer, the rest in the autumn, of 1982.²

Each bulletin begins with an opening section of 'news headlines', usually three in number. Most of these headlines are confined to a single sentence. Then follows a more detailed treatment of the same plus a few additional items. The detailed treatment of each news item will henceforth be referred to as a 'paragraph'. Each bulletin is read from the studio by a single announcer, but in some cases the studio presentation is interspersed with correspondents' reports, which give the impression of being scripted, and in a couple of cases also with excerpts from unscripted interviews or sports commentaries.

In the twelve bulletins were recorded a total of 580 verb phrases containing at least one of the features preterite tense/perfectness, perfectness defined as the combination of a form of the auxiliary HAVE and the preterite

participle of the next verb. In this number are included all the correspondents' reports but not the unscripted interviews and sports commentaries. Co-ordinate verb phrases were counted as separate constructions provided they each contained a separate main verb. The distribution of the 580 verb phrases over verb forms and clause types is set out in Table 1.

Table 1 Distribution of perfect/preterite verb forms in BBC news bulletins according to clause type. Horizontal percentages.

Verb Clause	Present perfect	Preterite	Preterite perfect	Other	SUM
Main	114 32.3%	204 57.8%	19 5.4%	16 4.5%	353 100.0%
Object	9 14.3%	25 39.7%	13 20.6%	16 25.4%	63 100.0%
Restrictive relative	8 25.0%	16 50.0%	4 12.5%	4 12.5%	32 100.0%
Non-restr. relative	3 13.6%	13 59.1%	3 13.6%	3 13.6%	22 99.9%
Temporal	1 2.5%	31 77.5%	4 10.0%	4 10.0%	40 100.0%
Other	7 10.0%	32 45.7%	12 17.1%	19 27.1%	70 99.9%
SUM	142 24.5%	321 55.3%	55 9.5%	62 10.7%	580 100.0%

It can be seen that the distribution over the various verb forms varies a great deal from clause type to clause type, PERF being distinctly more common in main clauses than in the various types of subordinate clauses. Among all clause types put together PERF and PRET between them account for 80% of the recorded verb phrases, while the corresponding percentage in respect of main clauses alone is as high as 90. In this paper we shall have to concentrate on the occurrences of PERF and PRET recorded in main clauses. Occurrences in subordinate clauses will not be considered, nor will combinations with for instance modals or progressive aspect.

The distinction between given and new time reference could be expected to be important for the PERF/PRET distribution, since if the time reference is given, i.e. if the same or a closely related point or period of time

has also been referred to by a preceding verb phrase, this previous mention will normally constitute a past-time anchor, and PRET will be the expected verb form. On the other hand, if the time has not been referred to before, a new anchor, expressed or implied, will be required by a PRET verb form, while PERF is not supposed to refer to time linked with past-time anchors and hence could be assumed to be more common to refer to new than to given time located wholly in the past.

In the case of each news bulletin the introductory headlines should therefore be treated separately, since these obviously refer to new time. In each of the following paragraphs of the bulletin the first verb phrase referring to past time also invariably expresses new time reference (no difference in the PERF/PRET distribution was detectable depending on whether the paragraph deals with a news item also mentioned in the introductory headlines). Subsequent verb phrases referring to past time in each paragraph may again express reference to new time, but more commonly they express what I classify as given time reference. Although there will sometimes be borderline cases, where the distinction between given and new time is difficult, the following tables give the PERF/PRET distributions separately for non-paragraph-initial constructions according as they express what has been classified as given or new time reference. In addition the textual divisions outlined above are included.

Table 2 Distribution of present perfect and preterite verb forms in main clauses of BBC news bulletins according to textual division. Co-ordinate constructions and correspondents' reports excluded. Horizontal percentages.

Verb Textual div.	Present perfect	Preterite	SUM
Headlines	24 92.3%	2 7.7%	26 100.0%
First past-time ref. in each paragraph	54 72.0%	21 28.0%	75 100.0%
Other reference to new time	20 37.7%	33 62.3%	53 100.0%
Reference to given time	4 3.8%	100 96.2%	104 100.0%
SUM	102 39.5%	156 60.5%	258 100.0%

Table 2 shows that the PERF/PRET distribution varies remarkably according to these distinctions, from a strong predominance of PERF among the headlines to an even stronger predominance of PRET among the verb phrases which refer to given time.

Evidently, the recorded variation is partly due to the distinction between given and new time reference. However, a lot of the variation is still unaccounted for, since even if one confines oneself to the verb phrases which express new time reference - the first three rows in Table 2 - the proportion of PERF varies from close to complete predominance - 92.3% - among headlines to little more than a third - 37.7% - among verb phrases which are not the first to refer to past time in their respective paragraphs.

In Table 3 the figures are broken down further. The choice of verb form is compared with the presence or absence of adverbial or other specifiers, and whether the time referred to extends up to ZERO or is located wholly in the past.

As regards specifiers, they are not all adverbial, nor do they all primarily express temporal reference, although a clear majority of the recorded specifiers are straightforward instances of temporal adverbials. However, two of the specifiers occur in noun phrases:

- (5) Last night's World Cup semi-final produced
victory for the West Germans.
- (6) Judy Oakes of England won the women's shotput.

The specifier last night in (5) is of the type classified as 'Deictic/time-wholly-in-past'. The object specifier in (6), the women's shotput, belongs under the label 'Other', where we find a decidedly mixed bag of specifiers. (6) occurs in a paragraph about the Commonwealth Games. Although the object noun phrase does not express temporal reference in the usual sense, there can be little doubt that it helps to locate the associated verbal situation in time.

The specifier referred to in the first row of Table 3, 'Deictic/ZERO', is in all four cases identical with the adverb now, exemplified by

- (7) Details of the legislation have now been made
known to Western journalists ...

This adverb can hardly be said to refer to the temporal location of the respective verbal situations, for example the time at which the details of

Table 3 Distribution of present perfect (PERF) and preterite (PRET) verb forms in main clauses of BBC news bulletins according to textual division, reference time and specification. Co-ordinate constructions and correspondents' reports excluded. Vertical percentages.

Textual division	Headlines			Initial in para			Non-initial in para/new time ref.			Non-initial in para/given time ref.			SUM		
Reference time	Up to ZERO	Wholly in the past		Up to ZERO	Wholly in the past		Up to ZERO	Wholly in the past		Up to ZERO	Wholly in the past		Up to ZERO	Wholly in the past	
Specifier \ Verb	PERF	PERF	PRET	PERF	PERF	PRET	PERF	PERF	PRET	PERF	PERF	PRET	PERF	PERF	PRET
Deictic/ZERO	-	-	-	-	1 2.0%	-	-	3 20.0%	-	-	-	-	-	4 4.5%	-
Deictic/time-up-to-ZERO	1 33.3%	-	-	4 80.0%	-	-	2 40.0%	-	-	-	-	-	7 53.8%	-	-
Deictic/past-including-ZERO	-	-	-	-	2 4.1%	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	2 2.2%	-
Deictic/time-wholly-in-past	-	-	1 50.0%	-	-	16 76.2%	-	-	11 33.3%	-	-	9 9.0%	-	-	37 23.7%
Clock-and-calendar	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	2 6.1%	-	-	1 1.0%	-	-	3 1.9%
Temporal clause	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1 3.0%	-	-	8 8.0%	-	-	9 5.8%
Other	-	1 4.8%	1 50.0%	-	1 2.0%	3 14.3%	-	1 6.7%	9 27.3%	-	-	9 9.0%	-	3 3.4%	22 14.1%
None	2 66.7%	20 95.2%	-	1 20.0%	45 91.8%	2 9.5%	3 60.0%	11 73.3%	10 30.3%	-	4 100.0%	73 73.0%	6 46.2%	80 89.9%	85 54.5%
SUM	3 100.0%	21 100.0%	2 100.0%	5 100.0%	49 99.9%	21 100.0%	5 100.0%	15 100.0%	33 100.0%	-	4 100.0%	100 100.0%	13 100.0%	89 100.0%	156 100.0%

the legislation were made known. It rather serves to emphasise the present implications of the past situation, i.e. it labels PERF explicitly as a resultative PERF.

In the category of 'Deictic/time-up-to-ZERO' we find adverbials of the set so far, since then, up to now, still, which are typical PERF adverbials.

The two instances of 'Deictic/past-including-ZERO' both consist of the adverbial this morning. Since they occur in news bulletins broadcast at 9 o'clock in the morning, it is clear that they do not indicate any separation from ZERO, although the associated verbal situations both belong unequivocally to the past. One of the two constructions is

- (8) The bodies of 64 of those who died in the Falklands fighting ... have been brought home this morning.

The nine temporal clauses of course help to fix the temporal location of the verbal situations of the respective main clauses, but in some cases a more important function seems to be to denote cause or circumstance, as in

- (9) The attack happened when a car drew up and the two men in it opened fire.

Some of the recorded combinations of verb form and specifier, or lack of specifier, may seem odd in view of the general assumption that PRET verb forms depend on past-time anchors, while PERF forms do not allow such anchors but usually require specification if referring to time-up-to-ZERO.

For instance, Table 3 shows that six of the thirteen PERF forms referring to time-up-to-ZERO take zero specification, in spite of the fact that none of those reference times have been given before. This apparent oddity simply demonstrates that the language offers many devices for indicating temporal relations other than through the use of what can with any reason be called temporal specifiers. As illustrated by (10), a negated PERF normally refers to time-up-to-ZERO even without specification:

- (10) In spite of a widespread search no trace of her has been found, but the police say they'll keep on looking.

In other cases the context may make it clear that the verbal situation

may or will be reiterated, in which case the reference time was classified as extending up to ZERO. One example is

- (11) Eight other districts have voted to continue to permit drinking on Sundays.
... The counting of votes in two remaining districts will begin this morning.

In both (10) and (11) an adverbial like so far or up to now could easily be added without significantly altering the meaning.

The use of PRET without temporal specification to refer to new time, in a total of twelve of the recorded constructions, also calls for a comment. Again this illustrates the fact that temporal relations may be indicated by other means than the use of overt specifiers. (12) exemplifies the use of PRET to refer to unique past time:

- (12) Miss Merchant established her reputation in the plays of Harold Pinter ...

As regards the 27 PRET constructions which occur with temporal specifiers to refer to given time, the explanation is in most cases that those times were first referred to by unspecified PERF forms, as exemplified by

- (13) But differences of opinion inside the Conservative Party ... have been highlighted by remarks by the former Prime Minister, Mr Edward Heath. Interviewed on BBC television last night, he criticised the leadership ...

The sequence of unspecified PERF followed by specified PRET was very common to introduce new past time. However, the sequence of unspecified PERF plus unspecified PRET, with PERF establishing the sole anchor for PRET, was even more frequent. (14) is an example of such a sequence:

- (14) In Northern Ireland the father of a so-called IRA super-grass has been kidnapped. Mr Patrick Gilmour, who's 61, was taken from his home in Londonderry by three masked men ...

One comment finally on the four constructions in which PERF verb forms, all of them unspecified, are used to refer to given time-wholly-in-past. In these cases a PRET verb might have been expected instead, as in (14).

In all four cases the first (and only preceding) reference to the same time is by an unspecified PERF. What characterises these constructions is that the initial PERF is very strongly resultative, so that the attention is focused more on the present result than on the past situation bringing about that result. Two of these constructions are

- (15) A strike by American train drivers ...
has been postponed President Reagan
has used his special powers to order 40,000
men to continue work for 60 days

and

- (16) The Labour MP for the London constituency of Newham
Northwest, Mr Arthur Lewis, has been rejected by his
local party as its candidate for the next general
election. He's been replaced by Mr Tony Banks

It seems that in both (15) and (16) the situations denoted by the initial verbs - POSTPONE and REJECT, respectively - are less closely associated with specific reference to the past than is the case with most other PERF verbs, and that this accounts for the use of another PERF verb form.

As regards the question of resultativeness more generally, this factor did not appear to play any important part in the choice of verb form in the recorded news bulletins. It stands to reason that potentially all past situations leave traces which can be viewed as results from a present standpoint. Concerning the language of radio news bulletins more specifically, one would not expect a past situation to be considered worthy of a mention in such a bulletin unless it was thought to have some bearing on the present. In discussions of PERF, however, the term 'resultativeness' is normally used in a more precise sense, to refer to a present state resulting from a past situation, the past situation often being denoted by a telic predicate. There are some but not many straightforward instances of such resultativeness in my BBC corpus, and PERF is not used in all of them. In (17), which is from a paragraph dealing with Brezhnev's funeral, PERF and PRET occur in a parallel construction, both of them with clear implications of present result:

- (17) Red Square has been sealed off with crush barriers,
and during the night hundreds of foreigners staying
in central Moscow were moved in buses to other hotels,
a sign that nothing is being left to chance.

As might be predicted, PRET occurs with the adverbial specification of past time, although the situation denoted by that verb is just as resultative as that denoted by the PERF verb: Red Square is now sealed off, the foreigners are now out of central Moscow.

Considered as a factor conditioning the choice between PERF and PRET, resultativeness can thus be seen to be secondary to the temporal specification. PRET is used in cases where there is a past-time anchor, PERF in cases where the verbal situation is located within a period of time extending up to ZERO. We have seen, however, that past-time anchors may be established in a variety of indirect ways, besides the straightforward use of temporal adverbials.

In cases where the same or a closely related point or period of time has been referred to by a preceding verb phrase, that time has been regarded as given, and as expected PRET is used in a vast majority of these cases. More interesting from our point of view are the cases where the reference is to what has been classified as new time. If the reference is to time-wholly-in-past, there are then two main possibilities: one may have an unspecified PERF construction, or a PRET construction with some kind of past-time specification, direct or indirect, expressed or implied. We have seen that among the constructions expressing new time reference there is a very strong predominance of PERF in the introductory headlines, the proportion of PERF forms decreasing gradually as one moves via the verb phrases expressing the first past-time reference in each paragraph, where there is still a majority of PERF forms, to the verb phrases expressing what has been classified as new time reference later on in a paragraph, where there is a majority of PRET forms.

The use of PERF is thus conditioned not only by reference to new time, but by the introduction of new information more generally. This can be explained from the fact that an obvious objective underlying the composition of radio news bulletins is to make the information to be conveyed as easily accessible as possible. This is an important consideration, because of the spoken delivery. For this reason it may be thought desirable to introduce the information gradually, adding detail step by step. As regards temporal information, the advantage of PERF from this point of view is that it makes it possible to refer to past time without specifying the temporal location any further.

In this respect there is an obvious difference between radio news bulletins and printed news reports, for instance in newspapers, where

there is no similar need for gradual introduction of new information, since the reader is free to take the time he requires to absorb the information. Preliminary investigations of the PERF/PRET distribution in for example newspapers support this assumption: textual position has not been found to affect the PERF/PRET distribution in printed news reports.

This difference in the use of PERF and PRET may further be related to an important difference between the language of radio news bulletins and that of printed news reports in respect of verb forms and other variables depending on temporal deixis: in printed news reports there is an obvious gap between the reader's ZERO and that of the people writing the reports. From the reader's point of view, therefore, a reported situation is not capable of being located at any or all time up to ZERO, because it cannot be located during the time that has elapsed since the newspaper was printed. At the beginning of this paper the possibility that a past situation may be located at any time up to ZERO was said to be the defining characteristic of PERF. On the assumption that verb forms are chosen so as to anticipate the reader's point of view, this may explain why PERF verb forms are less common in the news reports printed in newspapers.

With radio news bulletins there is no similar gap during which the reported situations cannot be located. That makes PERF freely available. We have seen that the language uses this freedom to ease the introduction of new past-time information.

NOTES

1. Some other works defining the essential PERF/PRET opposition in terms of temporal reference are Bryan (1936), Hall Partee (1973), Inoue (1979), McCawley (1971), McCoard (1978), Reichenbach (1947), and Tichý (1980). A detailed account of my own view of PERF and PRET is given in Elsness (1983).
2. I am grateful to the BBC for permission to use their news bulletins for this study.

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